MAYUR MODULE

James J. Preston

MIRACULOUS EXPERIENCE

A Study of Orissan Hinduism

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MAYUR MODULE : 4

Anthropology
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—General Editor—
Bhabagrahi Misra

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Introduction

Dr. Bhabagrahi Misra

It is always a difficult task for a Social scientist to comprehend religious or cultural phenomena of an alien culture. Very often the scientist is influenced by the conceptual categories with which he is familiar through his upbringing, education and training. So "objectivity" is overshadowed by the scientist's own cultural biases and unconscious approach in translating other cultures in one's own terms.

Anthropologists, particularly, are conscious of this dilemma, but sometimes reluctant to study religious phenomena like "miraculous experience"— either they are not interested in such studies or they feel it "delicate" issues to be able to understand within the framework of

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"scientific temperament." But the problem of such studies is not only necessary for "indepth" understanding of cultures,but also relevant for realising the parameters within which people live, think and act within their social milieu. Perhaps the best way to arrive at any conclusion, is to depend extensively on what the people themselves say about their experiences, since their words are echoes of their belief-systems.

Preston, unlike most social scientists, was trained and educated in institutions, where he not only learnt to be respectful to other's views, but as an anthropoligist he understood that man has many ways of living—which offers him the possibilities and alternatives to face life as it is within a particular culture-area. Preston has lived in Orissan villages, towns, has established rapport with his

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informants, has earned their confidence, and often considered by the people as an American "Hindu" and had got "entree" to religious temples and shrines as a "Christian-Brahman". This indicates Preston's pursuasive aptitude in becoming a part of the culture, before describing or analysing the phenomena in the conceptual categories of the people themselves.

This study along with his numerous articles and books on Orissan brand of "Hinduism", places his work as unique and somewhat a departure from his predecessors. I think, this study will provide inspiration to other scholars to become objective enough in understanding alien cultures, if one believes that people's version is the barometer for making any judgement/observation about other cultures. *Miraculous Experience* is such a study—a landmark in anthropological literature.

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Introduction

The science of comparative religion, newly emerging in the latter part of the twentieth-century, is concerned with certain aspects of religion once considered beyond the pale of systematic investigation. In recent years a rich literature has evolved on numerous topics previously ignored by anthropologists. There is an increased awareness that the experiential dimension needs to be explored. Thus, ethnographic descriptions of religious experience have become more popular, such as studies of shamanic visions, possession trance, and mystical experience; yet almost nothing has been published on miraculous experiences found in one form or other in virtually every religion.

Why has the subject of *miracles* remained so obscure in the anthropology of religion ? Probably this lacuna is related to the general hesitation of anthropologists to discuss topics like imagination, mysticism, or miracles.

> Anthropologists...despite their ambition to talk "hard science" and to eschew the romantic, the poetic, and the involving, use the term "mystical" sloppily to cover everything related to the supernatural. I suspect that their sloppiness is studied; they apparently fear that the profession will regard their study of potentially so

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involving a thing as mysticism as non-professional, that their colleagues will regard them as converts (Bharati 1976 : 18)

Bharati has identified a sensitive pulse in our science. Yet, we have grown beyond the compulsive Boasian preoccupation with making anthropology a" legitimate" science. Mysticism, imaginative experience, and miracles are all topics of great significance to the understanding of religion.

The first task required for the study of the miraculous is to establish a set of definitive parameters. This is a problem because the definition of *miracle* varies widely within different religions, cultures, and from one individual to another. The Catholic church, with its strong ecclesiastical system of sanctioning, streamlines the complex phenomenon of miracles. Yet, what one person considers to be a *miracle* the church would call a *favor*, representing a less profound category of encounter with the sacred. This problem of definition is compounded further in "Hinduism" where there is no official system for validating the legitimacy of miraculous experiences. Defining a miracle is so difficult in Hindusim that the topic has remained virtually neglected.

The typical dictionary definion of *miracle* is "an event that appears unexplainable by the laws of nature and is held to be supernatural in orgin". Corollary to this definition is the notion that miracles are events defined by individuals or groups as being either beyond the laws of

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nature and/or supernatural in orgin. In other words, phenomena that might be considered natural to some people are attributed with supernatural qualities by other. Of course, the problem with this definition is the assumption that natural law as defined in Western cultures is an objective reality. Furthermore, "natural" is not necessarily opposed to "supernatural" in a people's worldview. Keeping this definition in mind, and after having reviewed the many dimensions of miraculous experience in Hinduism, it will be necessary to deconstruct this Western definion of miracle at the end of thi study.

In one of the few anthropological studies of subjective experience, Obeyesekere (1981 : 113) postulates afeedback system between cultural ideas and the subjective. He says, "There is no contradiction in the view that subjective experience may help validate and give reality to culture." According to Obeyesekere, "personal symbols" are not entirely idiosyncratic; they play an important role as devices by which humans process,assimilate, and otherwise metabolize the cultural code. Furthermore, such personal symbols form the infrastructure which contributes to the development and continuity of the cultural system. Obeyesekere(1981: 169)calls this process "subjectification" which is the "... process whereby cultural patterns and symbol systems are put back into the melting pot of consciousness and refashioned to create a culturally tolerated set of images that I designate as subjective imagery." Thus, dreams, visions, miracles, and other

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subjective experiences are significant variables to be assessed if we are to perceive the operation of the cultural system as a whole.

Elsewhere I have argued that religious experience is neither reality nor fiction but participates in a state of consciousness that might be called "fictive reality"(Preston, 1984). Such fictions are utilized by the human imagination to approximate ultimate truths otherwise difficult to grasp. Miracles are part of the phenomenon of fictive reality. They represent, for the people who experience them, the interpenetration of the natural with the supernatural.[1] Thus, through the study of miracles we are able to assess a portion of a people's religious worldview.

Another nagging problem must be resolved. Often the criticism leveled against the study of subjective experience is that there is no way of knowing whether the other person has had a genuine experience or just pretends to have had one (Bharati 1976:79). Although it is sometimes possible, through direct observation and testing to investigate some cures and other miracles, for the most part miraculous experience remains highly subjective. While anthropologists can legitimately study the reports of miracles we can never know whether they are "genuine." Indeed, the very question of whether a miracle is genuine or not, may be biased by the value system of the investigator. We do not avoid studying myths and rituals because they might not fit into the naturalistic worldview associated with the social sciences.

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Miraculous Experiences

Although it is artifical to create a typology of miraculous experience for Hinduism, the categories developed here offered as heuristic devices for perceiving the scope of the phenomenon.[2] In many cases these categories overlap and fade into each other. Rather than viewing miracles as occurring in distinct categorical formats, it is more accurate to conceive them as falling a continuum that forms an organic whole with few, if any distinct breaks. Nor are any of the categories suggested below conceived as single unitary phenomena, they are usually compounded, as in the case of miraculous telepathic communication with distant relatives, accompanied invariably by spontaneous cures, miraculous dreams, or some other experience of the supernatural.

The categories presented here are not arranged in any particular order; not only do they overlap, in many instances they are linked together in culturally patterned sequences. However, these sequences are not always predictable. The experience of one type of miracle is not necessarily accompanied by specific other. Nevertheless, there are certain repeated patterns of stereotyped religious imagery reported by individuals that can be characterized best as "culture pattern miracles."

It should be noted that not all informants interviewed reported having miraculous experiences. Hindus are no more susceptible to religiosity than other people, although they seem less reluctant than others, to talk about their religious experience. I found certain personality

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types, ranging across all classes, castes, and educational backgrounds, who might be considered pragmatists. Not only did these individuals not experience miracles, they articulated grave doubts as to whether such things are possible.

On the other extreme are those who see miracles in almost every event. These "religious virtuosos" are eager to accept almost anything told them so long as it is couched in religious language. While religious virtuosos, like skeptics, represent a minority, they display important characteristics about Hinduism which need elaboration. Most striking is the great scope available in Hinduism for experiencing the miraculous. The strong and relatively unbroken oral tradition that remains in the subcontinent, along with the Hindu penchant for constructing an almost infinite number of sacred images,[3] creates a climate conducive to a rich variety of religious experiences.

Between these two extremes is the bulk of the population with the capacity to compartmentalize miracles in a somewhat perplexing style to the linear oriented western mind. Most people did not see any incongruity between their routine, pragmatic daily lives and the event of miraculous intervention they experienced. This is illustrated in the cases of individuals with advanced college degrees who explained most of their life experiences with Western scientific categories but had no hesitation to see miracles as valid, feasible, and not incongruous with scientific training. One professor of physics, for instance, told

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me that he had been healed by Ganges water which he insisted is absolutely pure and free of disease. The interesting fact about this middle group is that through a process of mental compartmentalization they are able to operate simultaneously within two or more systems of logic and meaning without displaying the slightest degree of stress about inconsistencies perceived by outside observers.

The categories of miracles described below do not constitute the full range of miraculous experience available within Hinduism. Alterations of time and space, miraculous possession trances and reversals of the natural order are rarely reported. However, miraculous dreams, the granting of boons, and reports of miraculous cures are widespread. Some of these miracles are associated particularly with religious specialists such as wandering mendicants, priests, and saintly people. Others are experienced by individuals at all levels of social rank with no special religious vocations.

1. *Miraculous Possession Trance* :

Altered states of consciousness have been reported widely in the literature as expressions of religious experience, and they are found in some form or other in virtually every religion. Hinduism is notorious for its wide variety of mechanisms to create altered states of consciousness. One form of altered consciousness is possession trance, widely reported in village Hinduism. Not all individuals who experience possession trances interprete them as being

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miraculous. However, some people believe they are divinely inspired phenomena that represent the miraculous intervention of the supernatural in the course of ordinary human life. While these miraculous possession trances are sometimes experienced spontaneously by individuls, in other cases they are deliberately nurtured through the development of an attitude of surrender to the divinity. In India women seem to be particularly susceptible to trances. They are possessed usually by a goddess who speaks to them through the trance medium. This form of miraculous possession trance is associated with the folklore of certain shrines. At numerous temples similar stories were told of a woman who became possessed by the goddess. The possessed woman is believed to be able to diagnose and cure illnesses while in a state of trance; she is also able to materialize *mahaprasad* (sacred food offered to a deity) from the Puri Jagannath temple and to foretell the future. The following is an example of a spontaneous miraculous possession trance.

> Two women suffering from cholera were taken for treatment to a small village clinic. Suddenly one of them jumped out of bed and demanded that a certain stick be brought from a particular house in a nearby village. This was done. Next she led down her hair, started talking with a loud authoritative voice and demanded that two priests from a nearby village who worship the goddess be brought into her presence. When the priests arrived the woman said to them: "Here I am without a morsel of food. You have not fed me properly for three days—and why ?

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The priests were shocked that the woman knew their shortcomings (they were neglecting the proper rituals for the goddess). Then the woman stood up and demanded that a sari of a particular color be brought from a trunk in another room. This was found and the woman put it on. Next she said it was time for her to go about the village to see how her "subjects" were getting along. Then she left in a rush, running through the village streets, and shocking people because she was possessed by the goddess.When finally the woman reached the temple of the goddess, she passed out on the ground totally unconscious. We sprinkled her with water. She was surprised when awakened and asked why she had been brought to this place. The woman was quite confused and disoriented, but her cholera was completely cured.

While miraculous possession trances, including those associated with the famous fire walking tradition (Freeman 1974), are not uncommon in Orissa, cases of possession by ghosts, spirits or witches are reported more frequently. These are usually associated with young girls considered to be especially vulnerable to trances. Occasionally cures of demonic fits of possession trance may be considered miraculous,particularly if a priest, sacred object, or prayers are part of the exorcism. It is appropriate to draw a clear distinction between miraculous possession trances and the more common possession by evil spirits.

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2. *Supernormal Powers*

Miraculous powers are received either as sporadic or more permanent divine gifts. The latter are usually miracles attained through association with temple rituals or through the miraculous powers known as *siddhis* developed in advanced states of yoga. Supernormal powers include a whole range of phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and the ability to predict future events. In some cases the performance of particular tantric rituals can elicit miraculous powers, even when the individual does not want them. Consequently, it is believed that tantric rituals should be performed only by specialists who can handle the resulting psychic powers without "going mad."

Telepathic abilities are attributed frequently to respected gurus. A highly educated twenty-three year old Brahman woman reported the following ability to communicate with her dying guru across distances.

> I had high respect for my guru whose soul communicated with me at his death. I was studying for examinations. One day before the big exam, I felt an inner commotion—a kind of tempest inside. I said to my mother. "Perhaps something has happened to our guru." At that very moment he died. He must have been thinking of us because in a few hours we received a call informing us of his death.

Sometimes direct communication with the supernatural is considered to be a miraculous event. Various

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devices, other than prayer, may be used to accomplish this task, particularly the smoking of *ganja* (hashish). Indeed, some gurus take drugs regularly to release super-normal powers. As one informant expressed it, the use of these aids is like "......making a telehone call to the deity." Some people were wary of the clairvoyant powers attained by those who practice tantric rites. They distrusted the use of such powers by those who could turn them toward "evil."

Predictions about the future, clairvoyant powers, and various form of telepathy are reported often as occurring in dreams. Divinely inspired dreams are widely shared among Hindus in village India. Some people have visions of deites who are believed to give them the power to foresee future events. Predictions of the end of the *Kali Yuga*, the coming of great devastating wars, or the apotheosis of a living *avatar* are typical miraculous insights about the future. Not all individually with paranormal powers can be considerad mentally stable. A certain portion of these people are acknowledged by community members to be mentally deranged. Still, in India, psychic powers are not diagnostic for mental illness. Many Hindus believe they have psychic gifts that they consider neither abnormal nor in any way unusual.

The most widely practiced institutionalized form of supernormal comunication takes the form of divination. Often divination rites are practiced by priests in Hindu shrines who seek answers to questions posed to a deity The following divination miracle is reported by a temple priest.

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> Some years back smallpox spread in the city (Cuttack, Orissa). A man was suffering from a serious case of this disease. I was asked for three days in a row to go to that man's house, but I avoided going there. On the fourth day I asked the goddess during the *puja* (worship service, to heal the man. While worshipping the goddess, a flower located on the deity's shoulder fell down and landed below her neckline. This sign was somewhat good. However, if that flower had fallen down even further, it would have indicated that man would get well. Unfortunately the person died a few days later. Although we had a little bit of hope, this miraculous sign from the deity had forewarned us that he would die eventually.

In another reported case the falling of an object is interpreted as a "bad" rather than a "good" sign from the deity. Here the same temple priest utilizes special rituals to help cure a sick person.

> A sick relative was taken to Cuttack General Hospital but his illness did not improve. I was asked to worship the goddess on behalf of the sick man. So I brought 108 *bel* leaves(sacraments associated with Lord Shiva and some female deities) and wrote a special *mantra*(using a stick and sandalwood paste) on each of the leaves. I started worshipping the goddess with these *mantras* for the prescribed 108 days. However,after thirty days had passed, it was clear something was wrong. On the 31st day the bracelet of the goddess fell to the

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floor. This was a bad sign. So I told my relatrves that the patient may be in trouble. In a week's time he died.

One of the most interesting characteristics of divination is ifs utility for resolving social problems by depersonalizing conflicts and projecting them onto the divinity. A good illustration of this principle can be taken from a conflict that raged at one of Orissa's well-known village goddess shrines. The issue in 1947 was whether the deity should be vegetarian or nonvegetarian. The community was split over this matter and needed to make a firm decision to everyone's satisfaction before Durga Puja, when several buffaloes were traditionally sacrificed in the past. The division in the village was so intense that people were openly fighting over the issue until the local *zamindar* (land owner) and the President of the temple's Board of Trustees decided to solve the problem through divination. On different pieces of palm leaf two messages were written one arguing in favour of sacrifice and the other against it. These two items were fixed on the head of the deity's icon in the shrine. The chief priest then posed the following question to the goddess. "If you are in favor of sacrifice let the one piece of palm leaf drop down, and if you prefer to be vegetarian let the other piece drop." Then the door of the shrine was shut. The next day they found that the piece of palm leaf in favor of abolishing sacrifice had fallen to the ground. Thus, a difficult communiy decision was resolved by a third judicious party, the deity, who intervened through the miracle of divination.

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On the private level individuals believe they exercise divinely attained supernormal powers for a wide range of different phenomena, such as finding lost articles, foreknowledge about the sex of an unborn child, answers to questions on tests, or telepathic communication with dead ancestors. Since the miraculous is easily accessible to Hindus of all degrees of spiritual development, there is almost no limit to the number of different life situations that can be addressed with this kind of religious language.

3 Reversals of the Natural Order :

Supernatural beings are believed to be able to communicate with humans by altering time, space, and the great forces of nature. These miracles are similar to the Old Testament where God enters into history, a tradition in which the divinity enters the human world by reversing the natural order—defying death, stopping storms, and reminding humans that there is a divine time that transcends human attempts to control the cosmos. These types of miracles are reported less frequently in India than many of the others noted here. Not all Hindus agree about whether natural events, such as storms, droughts or plagues, are controlled by the supernatural. A majority of my informants expressed the belief that natural disasters are not generally atributed to supernatural causes, although few would exclude that possibility.

One of the most important miraculous manifestations reported in India is the spontaneous emergence of

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sacred centers (some of which become pilgrimage shrines). This is a phenomenon that has received little attention in the literature on Hinduism. A prominent example is the ubiquitous self-generated Shiva *lingas* (phallic symbols of the deity) located in many Indian villages. These are miraculous *swayambbu* (selfgenerated) images representing Lord Shiva that emerged spontaneously as the deity became manifested in particular places. According to local folklore these organic *lingas* grow and contract. Some, have become shrines of all-India importance, such as as the famous ice *lingam* at Amarnath, which is a natural phenomenon embued with religious significance as it changes shapes from one season to another Others are merely stones (usually black in colour) with specific markings and decorations placed upon them. Typically they are venerated with great devotion and associated with legendary stories telling of how they became manifest in a particular place. Self-generated sacred images extend to deities other than Lord Shiva. Usually these are tribal icons commonly assciated with legends describing miracles that brought about their manifestations (an example of how miracle stories. are part of the Hinduization of tribal deities).

The natural order may be reversed miraculously by the arrest of the natural processes of decay, putrefaction, and death. A holy place like the Ganga river is considered ritually pure, no matter how much organic

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matter may have decayed in it. There is a holy well at Orissa's famous tantric temple dedicated to the goddess Biraja in the town of Jajpur, where it is claimed that the water remains untainted, despite hundreds of food offerings thrown into it to honor the ancestors each year. These *pindas* (offerings to the ancestors) are balls of, rice, mixed with sugar and bananas. The well is believed to be pure because it is connected underground to the Ganga river hundreds of miles away. Thus, by association with India's most sacred river the well water here can *not* become polluted.

Devotees of Sai Baba claim that their guru, considered to be a manifestation of Lord Shiva (and other deities), is capable of working miracles that reverse the natural process of death. He is reported to have brought a dead man back to life in Madras. Followers of Sri Ma (while she was alive) believed she could live on little or no food, was immortal, and had a body that was gradually turning into "pure spirit."

At several temples a miraculous story was told involving a tongue that had been cut out, then healed by the deity. In one case, a man is reported to have cut off his own tongue during a frenzy; the tongue was seen lying on the ground. He did this because of a desire to make a personal sacrifice to the deity in the shrine. A few days later, to everyone's amazement,

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the man was able to speak again. This story later corroborated by several informants during intensive interviewing was interpreted as a miracle.

The supernatural may miraculously alter time, as in the following case of a priest who is able to attend his father's funeral due to the intervention of the goddess.

> I was meditating for several days at Puri temple. On the night my father died the temple was locked so I couldn't be informed until the next morning. The bus leaves at 7:00 a.m. but I had just received the message at that very hour. Fearing I would be late I prayed to the divine power; "Ma ! Stop the bus for me." When I arrived at the bus stand it was clear that the bus had tried to start but wasn't moving. The driver was looking inside the engine. As soon as I got into the bus I said: Ma" and the bus started. When I got off the bus at Cuttack City I saw my father' body being carried through the streets by my brothers. Then I put the bier to my shoulder and helped carry him to the cremation grounds.

Not only it is possible for time to be altered, space, or objects, in meterial space, can be transformed radically by the supernatural. My notes include numerous instances of substances that became transformed by deities at temple, such as wine changed into bread, or meat into vegetarian substances. Legendary miracles of this variety usually involve the change of something polluting into a more

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benign non-polluting agent. Tha most common miraculous transformation reported involves the issuing of sacred ash, honey, sweet aromas, or material objects from sacred icons. Statues, photographs and paintings of deities or saintly persons are attributed with miraculous powers (not unlike the weeping madonnas of Catholicism). The following is the case of a forty year old villager who was living in the city of Cuttack. This man is open to miraculous experiences despite a college education.

> Once as a student, while sleeping in my room, I saw two figures standing at the open door. It was the dead of night. I noted with great surprise that one of the figures was the goddess and the other was Lord Ganesh who had a large sweetmeat in his hand. I rushed accross the floor and threw myself at the feet of the goddess. I knew this was a vision because when I stood to my feet the figures disappeared—but a sweet scent came out of the picture of the goddess on my home altar.

The miraculous appearance of water, honey, or *vibbuti* (sacred ash) on photographs is frequently reported by devotees of Sai Baba, a contemporary South Indian cult figure. One man told me that twenty bottles of sweet scented water had been collected from a photograph of Sai Baba that had spontaneously started to flow. This was witnessed by many people in the neighborhood. I attended several crowded Sai Baba meetings held in the

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homes of wealthy businessmen. During the course of these ecstatic *bhajans* (religious song sessions) individuals insisted that the honey and sarced ashes, which usually cover the elevated photos of this guru, had increased miraculously in quantity during the *puja* (worship service). Often I was asked to validate their claims. The materialization of objects is a widespread miraculous tradition in the Sai Baba movement. Several books have been written about this guru's ability to vomit up golden *lingas,* produce sacred statues out of thin air, or sprinkle sacred ash from his hands (Murphet 1971 and Kasturi 1971). It has been claimed that Sai Baba miraculously pulled a typewriter out of his hair—a task not so difficult to comprehend when one sees the amount of hair on his head. Some Hindus view these spectacular miracle stories with skepticism. On the other hand, many of the "religious virtuosos' in my sample were open to the validity of Sai Baba's miracles.

4. Miraculous Intervention :

Hindu deities may enter the world to express wrath, love, or approval of human actions. Divine intervention takes many forms. It is commonly believed that natural disasters are caused by deities (not all informants agreed on this question). Some people think that floods, famines railway accidents, and epidemic diseases are divine punishments for human sin. It is not uncommon to attribute the cause of these disasters to temple rituals that were performed incorrectly. As one informant expressed it : "If god wants to do it, he can destroey the whole world in

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an our. There is no strength as great as his. The 1971 cyclonic storm, that killed thousands in Orissa, occurred because there was too much evil in the world."

Temple rituals are sometimes linked to legendary miracles believed to have taken place in the past. The case of Bhagavati Temple in the village of Banpur illustrates the wrath expressed by a deity whose thirst for blood is not satisfied. The legend tells of a woman of the milkman caste who visited the temple daily to bathe the goddess in milk. One day, it was noticed she was missing. However human bones, hair and nails were found outside the temple. A priest, through meditation and tantric rites, was able to trace the crime to the *devi* (goddees) herself who had devoured the woman. Consequently, the priest covered the face of the deity with a brass plate on which her features are painted even today. (The body of this goddess is made of black granite stone.) The legend continues into the nineteenth-century when a British Settlement Officer was trying to tax the temple lands. On several occasions a furious bear was seen near his tent. Eventually he realized his mistake and went away. The goddess, in her fury, had visited him in the form of a bear. Miraculous tales of divine intervention are likely, at least in the case of this partially Hinduized temple, expressions of earlier tribal characteristics of a deity that may have been associated once with human sacrifice.

One of the most interesting exapmles of divine wrath was expressed in a legendary miracle tale repeated

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in at least five temples located throughout different parts of Orissa. The similarity of pattern in these tales is stunning. There are two variants of the story : (1) the deity is angry and punishes a thief who has stolen the temple treasures, or (2) a *harijan* (untouchable) is said to have polluted the temple by entering it. The deity is so angry that the person is found dead the next day.

At a small Kali temple in the city of Cuttack it was reported that during the British period a robber had stolen all the ornaments from the shrine. The thief was so confused as he left the temple that he was unable to find his way back to his village. A number of snakes were chasing him. He called out for help as loud as he could; then when he was helpless the people took the ornaments away. In another goddess shrine a miraculous tale of the same kind was told, but this time the thieves took the golden image of the goddess Bhattarika. The punishment was severe ; the thieves were blinded as they entered a nearby river to escape. At that time the raja, chief patron of the shrine, had a dream in which he saw this evil deed taking place. The deity cried out to him. "I am in the hands of thieves. Save me! "Then heroically the raja's men captured the golden icon and returned it to its proper place in the temple. Some of the priests admitted during interviews that stories of divine wrath help to prevent people from stealing temple treasures.

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These tales of divine wrath prevent untouchables from temple entry. Even in 1973 many of the shrines I visited in Orissa were still unattended by *harijans*. It was clear at one shrine how they were scared away. A priest indicated that back in 1948, when there was a great push throughout Orissa for temple entry by untouchables, a miracle took place expressing the deity's displeasure about the matter. One day untouchables tried to force their way in to the shrine, but soon after that they started vomiting blood near a big banyan tree in the temple compound. The *harijans* were so sick that they retreated; one died when he returned to his village. Here is a miraculous legend of divine intervention that punishes and prevents the breaking of a taboo.

Hindu deities also display nurturant and protective qualities by saving people from natural disasters or accidents. I have collected several accounts of individuals who became instruments of divine intervention by being told, often through dreams that they should build shrines for, or become devotees of, a particular deity or guru. The common theme through all these divine intervention stories is that the human world intersects with the divine, and the two are intermingled through the miracle.

5. *Attainment of Boons ;*

The miraculous granting of boons by deities is reported widely in Hinduism. Reports of miraculous boons collected in my study clustered around three general themes : 1) the enhancement of business (economic) 2,

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passing exams (intellectual), and 3) fertility (life enhancement). Miraculous boons are favours granted by deities in virtually every aspect of human life. Although these favours may be granted after intense bargaining with, or supplications to the deity, sometimes they are given unexpectedly.

Businessmen are notorious throughout India for devotion to the goddess Lakshmi. If their businesses flourish rhey promise to donate something new to the local temple. Marwaris, and other merchants in Orissa's cities, have the custom of asking the deity to bless the account books at certain times of year. Also people of various occupations ask for blessings of those items that sustain them: i.e., thread for weavers, automobiles for taxi drivers, gold for goldsmiths, and so on. Whenever merchants report miraculous experiences, these usually revolve around success in business, attaining money to pay off debts, making wise decisions after praying to the deity or receiving special messages through miraculous dreams. Worship of the deity may be linked to the daily profits of a business. As one merchant in Cuttack City expressed it: "On days when I worship the goddess with pure devotion I get five to six rupees profit. If I don't do this, I hardly make any profit at all."

Miracles may be associated with phenomena seemingly as mundane as the annual auction for concessions

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at Chandi Temple (Preston 1985 : 40-47). The government has set up an auction for the rights to sell various commodities (such as confections and flower garlands) to devotees within the temple compound. Temple concessions are very lucrative for the bidder who wins in the competition for a license. One merchant reported a miraculous dream in which the goddess Chandi told him to bid for the license to the ghee lamp shop as high as the bid would go. The deity said: " Do not fear. I am with you." The merchant had little money at the time because he had counted it wrong, since he could neither read nor write. After someone assisted him in countlng his money later, he discovered that he had enough to offer a very high bid,

The need for income from cash is critical among the urbanized people in Orissa's cities. Thus, one frequently cited miraculous boon is the attainment of a high paying job. Often people turn to prayer in hope of a miracle to overcome their obstacles. Competition is also high in the field of education, where students work hard to pass difficult exams. Here again miracles of divine assistance are reported among students. A brilliant physicist shares the following miraculous experience.

> I was very ill two weeks before a major set of exams. At that time I broke out with a severe case of boils Two days before the exams I was told by a doctor the boils would not clear up. When I prayed to the goddess she told me that I would meet somebody

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important soon. The next day I met a man who told me to go to a homeopathic practitioner. I did this. He gave me some medicine which cleared up the boils in time for the exams. When I sat for those examinations I felt calm, clear minded and sharp.

In an agricultural society with no form social security, other than the number of children one is able to bear, fertility is a prime concern for people. Consequently, many special favours are connected to childbirth. In India, with its high infant mortality rate it is critical for people to have a sense of security about the health of fragile children. Women are anxious to know the sex of the child because there is special status linked to having a male child. Thus, deities are worshiped seeking miraculous boons surrounding pregnancy and early childhood, as well as fertility of crops and livestock. Some village deities specialize in granting such boons. This is evident for the goddess Bhattarika in Baramba village located along the Mahanadi River. Here the deity specializes in the curing of cow diseases, the insurance of plentiful fishing for the fisherman caste, and the granting of children to barren women.

6. *Miraculous Dreams* :

Dreams are the most all-pervasive instruments for miraculous experience in Hinduism. Hindus see dreams as windows through which the supernatural may penetrate or *implode* into the human world. Many of the miracles

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I've already discussed were manifested in the form of dreams. Individuals share religious dreams in their communities and attain a certain amount of community status by doing so.

Dreams of ancestors are auspicious because they represent special graces from the world beyond. The following dream reported by a cloth merchant is typical of this genre.

> I dream often about different gods and goddesses especially if I've been thinking about them during the day. At one time I was desperate for money to operate my business. In fact I needed a large amount of cash the next morning. That night my dead father appeared to me in a dream. He said; "Do you need money ? How much?" I replied that I needed 1,000 rupees. He warned me to avoid selling the family land, then asked if I could manage with 500 rupees, and gave me a bag of money which he wanted me to count. When I awoke the next morning, a man was standing at the door of our house with a bag of money. It contained 1,000 rupees which he owed me for a business deal.

This dream reflects a number of interesting characteristics about miracles. What may appear to an outside observer to be a coincidence is interpreted as a miracle. Also, there is bargaining with the ancestor in this dream. The man is unwilling to settle for a partial miracle. More important still is the significance of dreams as

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apertures through which the "Other" enters into the world in the dream the man states exactly what he needs so that communication is precise and unambiguous. This pattern, where the dreamer becomes a conduit for some special message from the divinity, is quite widespread.

Dreams may act as media for cures. Deities in dreams may instruct individuals who are ill to perform specific rituals in order to be cured. In the following case of a miraculous cure, a man with leprosy dreamed that he was told by a deity to return to his village, and that he would find something along the route. The man reportedly followed these directions in his dream, found a plantain leaf with *dhal* and rice in a cornfield; he ate this divine food. When he awoke the leprosy had disappeared. At the time he had the dream the man's fingers were in an advanced state of decay. Today they are straightened and completely normal. Another case in this genre is that of a woman with chronic high blood pressure who dreamed she no longer wanted to live in this world and wanted to leave it forever.

> In my dream I was on my way out of this world when I acccidentally stumbled upon the Kali Temple in the graveyard. There was a girl about eighteen years old standing nearby; she had a *trisula* (trident) in her hand, was clothed in tiger skins and obviously was the goddess Kali. She said to me: "You cannot pass this way. You shouldn't leave this world." I woke up after that and found that over

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the days my illness had gotten better. Now every Saturday I worship at the Kali Temple in the graveyard.

This intimate relationship with the supernatural, attained through miraculous dreams, is a great source of comfort for people who sometimes feel helpless when facing serious illness. Dreams break down the barriers between gods and men. They act as devices by which the cosmos may *implode* into the world and heal the wounded. One can question whether these are "genuine" healings, but I have no doubt the people believed them to have a supernatural etiology.

7. *Supernatural Cures* :

Of the miraculous categories discussed so far none were reported as frequently as supernatural cures. These were noted by people of all ages, castes, educational backgrounds, and economic groups. Even the most pragmatic and non-religious people, who usually reported no miraculous cures, believed it was at least possible for such phenomena to occur. Only a small percentage of informants doubted the possibility of miraculous cures.

Some cures involve a sapurnatural agent embedded in sacramental items like sacred ash, holy water, *bel* leaf (sacrament of Lord Shiva) and *tulsi* leaf (sacrament of Lord Vishnu). These items have medicinal properties and are prescibed to cure disease like jaundice, filaria, and typhoid. Other objects with miraculous curative powers include the

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menstrual cloth of a deity, blood from an animal sacrificially consecrated to the gods, or other food offerings (*prasad*) utilized in the daily worship of a deity. A sixty-five year old woman of the weaver subcaste, suffering from a debilitating eye disease, reported a complete cure through a combination of medicinal drops placed in her eyes by a temple prist, along with daily prayers to Lord Shiva. Other religiously prescribed rituals are believed to have healing powers, such as giving alms to beggars, repeating certain *mantras* or sacrificing animals to a deity. Not all miraculous cures occur because individuals have sought them out. Many are spontaneous.

The range of these cures extends from disorders that are partially psychogenic in etiology, ranging from asthma, heart palpitations, epilepsy, and high fevers, to serious organic diseases not easily cured without modern medicine, such as cholera, leporsy, or syphilis. The following case of a spotaneous cure was reported by a man whose aunt suffered from high fever:

> It was around midnight when the goddess appeared amidst us here in this room. I brought my aunt who was suffering from high fever to our house. She was attacked by a witch while passing stool that morning (a common belief). My aunt was sitting upright in the room. and the rest of us were lying on the floor. I had just applied some *bel* leaf from Chandi Temple to my

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aunt. At that moment the goddess appeared saying:"The goddess dwells here." The witch must have left when the goddess appeared because my aunt's fever went down immediately. I was the only one who saw the goddess that night, even though I was not the most religious among the people in the room.

Conspicuos here in the opposition between pollution and purity, along with the intersecting worlds of witch-craft and religion. The deity has the power to displace the evil which may possess a person. The apparition and visitation of the goddess was a surprise to the participants in the miraculous healing, even though they had applied a well-known remedy to the ailing woman—the sacramental *bel* leaf from the temple. Still more striking the afflicted person became a place of cosmic confrontation between the forces of good and evil. Here is a key element in the Hindu understanding of miracle. The individual is always vulnerable, especially if he is ritually unclean, to becoming a centre where cosmic forces clash. Leading a clean and pure life, in terms of religious obligations and caste duties, is to diminish this vulnerability and to complete the course of one's destiny or *dharma*.

Miraculous cures, and other favors granted by the deities, are rewarded by votive offerings made in thanks-giving, such as special foods, saries, jewelry, ritual bathings and even the building of temples or annual ritual sacri-fices. Sometimes votive offerings are part of a *bargain*

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the individual has made with the deity. Bargaining with votive offerings is most widely practiced among lower castes. The term in the Oriya language for this is *mansik* (desire in the mind) which is difficult to translate into English. It means special offerings given to a deity in exchange for miracles or favors granted. Often individuals say: "I had a *desire in my mind* which was fulfilled by the deity." That desire requires compensation if fulfilled satisfactorily by rhe deity. Many of the temple treasures in India were accumulated by revenues associated with contractual relationships between deities as patrons and and devotees as clients. A large portion of the pilgrims who frequent village temples in India are seeking miraculous cures; they report unabashedly that they *expect* their wishes to be granted, otherwise they will abandon the worship of a particular deity.

Barganing for miraculous cures personalizes the relationship with the deity so that the individual is able to have a dialogue, similar to those familiar in everyday life. As an untouchable woman expressed it.

> When I worship the goddess I say to her: You have given me something today. What will you give me tomorrow ? We are all poor. Now I have fallen in danger due to my illness. You help me now and I will pay for a special set of rituals to be performed at the temple tomorrow."

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A woman of the drummer subcaste expressed this bargaining relationship even more conceretely when asked if she had ever been cured by a deity.

> Yes, I have been cured by the goddess. I was suffering from "water in the belly" twentytwo years ago. I said to the goddess: "If you cure me, I will exchange a head (sacrifice an animal) in place of my own head." I was cured soon after that, so I offered a ram at Cuttack Chandi Temple.

Note the direct and simple dialogue; no recitations of obsequious petitions are articulated by the individual. Here the deity is expected to perform a miracle for a person who has neither the time nor the means by which to play a more elaborate game of ritual supplication.

An institutionalized and highly patterned form of miraculous cure is the custom of "therapeutic temple sleep," where supernatural dreams are sought intentionally by individuals who desire cures at Hindu shrines. This is a widspread tradition in coastal Orissa, but I have never seen it discussed for other parts of India or in the vast literature on Hinduism.

What I have interpreted as 'therapeutic temple sleep" is called a *dharana* cure in the Oriya language; a tradition where devotees, often pilgrims who have traveled a long distance to be at a particular shrine,

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spend several days praying, fasting and sleeping in the temple compound.If they have been both vigilant (guarding against temptations of distraction)and devout,it is expected that the deity (usually a goddess) will visit them in a dream vision and cure them of their illness. I have intervie-wed a number of enthusiastic people who have undergone this ritual procedure and claimed miraculous results. Some of them appeared to be depressed, emotionally disturbed, some even psychotic, while others showed no overt psycho-logical pathology. At the temple of goddess Sarala in rural Orissa, which I studied extensively, there were always two or three people at any time undergoing a *dharana* cure. Typically the devotee comes to the temple, lies upon a straw mat all day and night, prays, eats only *prasad* (consecrated food offered to deities), drinks holy water, and bathes three times per day. The ritual is an act of purification and, if it does not work after three days, it is extended for twenty-one days.

In some cases serious diseases like syphilis, gonor-rhea, or leprosy (considered to be ritually, as well as physically polluting) may require the individual to stay at the temple for a thousand days to be cured miraculously. As one man expressed it:"My syphilis was cured completely after a thousand days at the temple. My body is now intermingled with the Mother (the goddess). She *is* in my body". The man who reported this was emotionally distur-bed and appeared to be possessed by the deity. This kind of *dh rana* cure is more extreme than most because,instead

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of merely dreaming about the goddess, the individual has become possessed by her.

The *dharana* tradition extends back into antiquity. On several occasions I came across origin myths of goddess shrines that included therapeutic temple sleep and visitations by the deity. Also, *dharana* or therapeutic temple sleep may be performed to attain miracle other than cures. The intriguing element is the incorporation of the individual into the bosom of the temple, where he returns to a womb-like environment to be healed, while the deity absorbs the pollution from his disease. The person identifies with the deity. He lives in the temple day and night, performing various tasks, assists the priests when needed, and escapes from the pressures of caste, village, community, and kin. Through identification with the deity, new life is breathed into the devotee. Thus, the miracle is not only a cure of body but also a healing of the torn spirits of fragile people.

8. *Culture Pattern Miracles* :

In the miraculous experiences already sketched there are certain patterns so frequently repeated as to suggest strongly that, like stereotypic dreams found in different cultures, there is also a phenomenon I would call "culture pattern miracles." A cross-cultural comparison reveals that certain miracles are identified with particular religious traditions and not others. A case in point is the stigmata in Christianity. This involves spontaneous ritualized bleeding, suffering through identification with the crucifixion,

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powerful visions, supernormal gifts, and miraculous healings. In Hinduism there is no evidence for culture patern miracles of this genre. Hinduism has its own culture pattern miracles which are unique, including their own stereotypic repetition of structure, imagery, and experience.

I have already noted one culture patern miracle in Orissan Hinduism, the *dharana* cure or "therapautic temple sleep." A more widespread phenomenon is the miraculous visionary ecstasy that occurs, usually at twilight time either when the individual is falling to sleep or in a waking state of semi-trance. The typical vision unfolds in the following pattern: The individual is astonished to see a young beautiful woman wearing a white sari, her hair unbraided, with a pleasant look on her face. Suddenly she is recognized as being a goddess. The person falls to his knees and the deity says: "Do not worry; your troubles will be over soon." The visionary ecstasy, or dream, then fades away and the favor sought by the individual is granted within the next few days. This same miraculous experience has been reported to me in towns and villages throughout Orissa, among people of different ages, economic backgrounds, and caste affiliations. The stereotyped pattern is astonishing in its similarity, demonstrating enough consistency to suggest, beyond any doubt, that we are reporting here a genuine and enduring culture pattern miracle.

Also noteworthy is a widespread vision of effulgent light, often blue in color, that surrounds a deity or

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acompanies the granting of a miracle. The same light is associated with the deepest levels of meditation (Preston 1985:53) during the performance of *puja* (ritualized worship of a deity) or in advanced stages of spiritual enlightenment. The light is cosmic. It represents a dimension beyond the ordinary world of sense perception. This same image is repeated in a great variefy of religious experiences and constitutes another culture pattern miracle.

Further research into the Hindu miracle tradition may reveal other culture pattern miracles. More intriguing is the possibility these culturally coded miracles are interconnected in larger patterns, forming constellations of miraculous phenomena that transcend individual, even local community levels. This wider constellation of miraculous experience is suggested in the nature of culture pattern miracles, since they assume, in Hinduism at least, a shared cosmic consciousness that looks out upon a universe more incandescent and real to those who experience it than the ordinary world.

Cosmic Implosion

The great diversity of responses to the miraculous in my study of Orissan Hinduism represents a glimpse into what must be an even more diverse universe of religious experience than we suspect for Hinduism. It is, however, a mistake to overemphasize this diversity;

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something ties it all together and that is what I have called "cosmic implosion" (Preston 1983b). In virtually all Hindu miracles reported, the key element at the heart of the miraculous experience was a movement inward through prayer, meditation, sleep, dream, or possession trance, then an implosion of the cosmic, or divine dimension, into the human world. Cures, boons, alterations of time and space, are consequences of this implosion. Unlike Western traditions, like Islam and Christianity, where God enters into history, in Hinduism the miracle is more centered in the context of life. For a Hindu god *is* history, *is* life, *is* being in the world. When the individual knows this, no matter what level of spiritual development, the miracle has taken place. Thus, the implosion is a movement inward to make manifest what is already there. No radical break exists here between man and nature, divinity and life, world and cosmos. No veil hides the holy of holies or disguises it.

Implosion is the major factor that distinguishes Hinduism, even at the folk level, from other religious traditions in the world. India may be the only place in the world where cosmic consciousness is not a condition reserved for a few elite introverts but a common experience available to everybody, in different degrees, depending on their state of consciousness, or even strive for it, but I do assert that it is possible in Hinduism to attain increasingly sophisticated levels of spiritual awareness with impunity

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Thus, consciousness of the common variety is ubiquitous in the Hindu system. Miraculous experience is not unitary, calibrated or calculated as it is, for instance, in Catholicism, where the code is watched carefully by a host of temporal priestly judges. The paradox about Hinduism that haunts the West is that despite the caste system, which is one of the most rigid social systems developed by humankind, Hindus have invented a freedom of religious consciousness that is the envy of the world. If an individual Hindu chooses to seek a glimpse of the "Other", it is always available to him; no burden of proof, no act of contrition, no martyrdom or ecclesiastical sanction is required.

The data presented here challenge us to rethink certain assumptions about human nature. Some cultural systems do not require a split in consciousness that separates the natural from the supernatural world. No one who has collected data on miraculous experiences in Hinduism could be contented with the Western dictionary definition of miracle offered at the beginning of this paper. That definition placed emphasis on the contrast between natural law and the world of the supernatural. There is no distinct language in Hinduism that separates miracles from the rest of life. Hinduism is an organic religion, and cosmic consciousness is rooted in the matrix of the organic world: it is part of the stuff of being. It may be unusual to end this study by *deconstructing* the very definition of the phenomenon being investigated: but that is the very point I am trying

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to make. The miraculous in hinduism is diffuse, ubiquitous, and multivocal. It occurs, to those who are receptive, in thousands of modalitities by a process of cosmic implosion. Thus, it defies definition. We have outlined a large variety of miracles reported by a variegated population. These are not expressions of an opposition between nature and divinity. If anything, the miraculous in Hinduism is manifested *through* nature, rather than *against* it. For the Hindu mind the deity is everywhere and always, the miraculous is all-pervasive and effusive, since the natural and the super-natural are two sides of the same coin. Thus, every definition we offer for miraculous experience in Hinduism, serves to confuse and confound rather than shed light on the phenomenon in question. By proceeding to define, then describe it, and finally to abandon a deeper appreciation of this inaccessible element of human experience which is somewhat penetrable but never entirely revealed.

NOTES

I deeply appreciate helpful comments and suggestions from Professors Norman Cutler, Ashok Malhotra, Robert Leslie, Ann Gold, and William Woolever.

1. I am presently engaged in a long-term research project on miracles associated with pilgrimage in North America.

2. The data on miracles reported here were collected in 1972-1973 during field work conducted in both urban and rural parts of Orissa, eastern India. The data presented here

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are based on lengthy systematic interviews conducted on all aspects of religion among thirty urban and twenty rural Hindus. Some results of those interviews were published in my book *Cult of the Goddess: Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple* (1985). Only a fraction of the information on miraculous experience utilized in this study was gathered from systematic *formal* interviews; a large portion of this sample derives from *informal* interviews and participant observation in dozens of sites throughout coastal Orissa.

3. See my article on the creation of the Hindus sacred image (Preston, 1984).

4. The Bhagavati Temple at Banpur is located in a transition zone between highly Brahminized temples along the coast of Orissa and still heavily tribal shrines located in the interior mountainous regions of the state. For further discussion of this temple and the Hinduization of tribal deities see my article "A Survey of Goddess Temples in Orissa" (1983a).

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